

'Two traditions' are distinctly different

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The word "tradition" is derived from the Latin *traditio*, meaning "transmission," or "handing on."

As a specifically Christian term, tradition refers to the church's handing on of its faith through the ongoing transmission of beliefs, doctrines, rituals, symbols, practices and entities such as the Bible.

Nearly 30 years ago, the great French Dominican theologian Yves Congar published a major two-volume work on the subject entitled, *Tradition and Traditions*. The distinction is crucial.

On the one hand, there is Tradition with a capital "T." This word stands for the essentials of Christian faith and practice that the church "hands on" from generation to generation.

On the other hand, there are traditions, with a small "t." This word stands for the accidentals of Christian faith and practice, i.e., for those realities that may be important — but not essential — to the faith and life of the church.

There are people on the extreme left of the church who deny even the existence of tradition (capital "T"), or who claim that Tradition is impossible to determine, in any case.

There are people on the extreme right of the church who collapse the two terms into one. They confuse traditions (small "t") with Tradition (capital "T").

For such Catholics, there is no distinction between Tradition and traditions. Everything is homogenized.

It is important to challenge this idea of Tradition, not only because it is theologically erroneous but also because it is pastorally harmful.

Tradition (capital, "T") includes those realities without which the church would not be the church.

Examples of essential realities covered by the world tradition are: the Eucharist, Baptism, and the other sacraments, the Bi-

ble, belief in the triune God, belief in the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, hope for eternal life, the practice of forgiveness of sins, faith in the redemptive significance of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the call to, and practice of, love of neighbor, the practice of mercy and justice as well as the other moral virtues, and so forth.

Examples of non-essential realities covered by the word tradition (small "t") are: belief in angels, the monarchical episcopate, the present canonical form of the papacy (e.g., with the power to appoint all bishops), benediction, the rosary, daily Mass, private confession, canon law, religious orders, clerical celibacy, the teaching against contraception, the diaconate, every kind and form of Marian devotion, belief in Marian apparitions, statues and

icons, indulgences, belief in limbo, monasticism, relics, seminaries, the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia, and so forth.

By no means is it always easy to determine whether a belief, a doctrine, a practice, a ritual, a symbol, or an entity is an integral part of Tradition (capital "T"), or only a tradition (small "t").

For example, some have argued that the exclusion of women from the ordained priesthood is something mandated by the Lord himself and, therefore, cannot be changed. As such, it is part of Tradition, and not simply a tradition.

Others have just as strongly disagreed. They stand with the judgment of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which had advised Pope Paul VI that no biblical evidence against the ordination of women exists.

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Although the church will always have, because it will always need, some forms of ministry, the question is whether there are particular ministries that are absolutely essential to the church — and, as such, can never be eliminated or substantially changed.

The left-wing insists it's a false problem, because nothing is essential. Everything is subject to elimination or substantial change.

The right-wing agrees that it's a false problem, but for opposite reasons. For the right, nothing "traditional" can be eliminated or changed, unless perhaps by special papal decree.

Both are wrong.

A bitter and jealous Jacob deceives his brother

By Cindy Bassett
Courier Columnist

"Come, little one," Jacob said to the lamb who stayed close on Jacob's heels as he pulled up the ripe vegetables. "It's time to feed my impatient stomach. Can you hear how it growls and whines for food?"

The lamb cocked his head once as if he understood and Jacob chuckled as he headed toward the house. "There's no need to worry, my friend. I will never allow anyone to use you for a meal."

This said, the animal trotted over to where his master waited for him. Jacob was just about to enter when he overheard his name spoken and he stopped abruptly. It was the same old argument that his parents had about him and his twin brother, Esau.

"Why must you always try to make Jacob like Esau?" his mother asked his father. "Twins they might be, but they are as different as day and night. There's nothing wrong in that!"

"Jacob must learn to be a man," Isaac



said. "He stays at home and takes care of his garden when he should be out in the world!"

"What you really mean is out hunting animals like Esau," Rebecca replied. "Killing animals has nothing to do with being a man! You are only thinking of your stomach and the tasty meat that Esau brings home for you."

Jacob turned away bitterly. It would always be like this with his parents. Esau, his twin, had been born just minutes before him. To his father, Esau might have been his only son. And someday, when his father died, Esau would become the head of the family with all of its privileges. It was his right as first born.

"I'm going to tell father how I feel, Jacob thought. But first I will fix his favorite soup. And he set himself about this task.

Jacob was just finishing the savory meal when he saw Esau coming through the field carrying a deer.

"Father's favorite food and favorite boy," he said angrily.

"Hello, brother, I'm as hungry as a lion," Esau called to him. "What are you cooking?"

"Lentil soup," Jacob said coldly.

"Feed me at once or I will die of starva-

tion," laughed Esau.

"Only if you give me something in return," said Jacob.

"Anything?"

"Anything?" Jacob asked carefully.

"That's what I said," Esau said. "Now hurry up."

"Give me your right as the first born," Jacob said.

Esau eyed his brother who continued to stir the soup without looking up. "Of what use is a birthright to me if I die from hunger? You may have it. Now give me the soup!" he said, reaching for his prize.

"Not so fast," Jacob said, pulling the soup back from his grasp. "First you must make a solemn oath."

"OK, get on with it," Esau said wearily.

"Repeat after me: I promise to give my brother, Jacob, all of my rights as first born in exchange for the soup that he gives me today."

Jacob waited until Esau had repeated every word.

"There, are you satisfied now?" asked Esau. "Now give me my soup!"

Esau ate his meal with gusto. He didn't give his promise another thought as he wolfed down the food.

Jacob was no longer hungry. As he watched his brother eat heartily, he was filled to overflowing with satisfaction of a different kind. Someday, everything was going to be different.

Just inside the entrance to the house, Rebecca observed the entire scene, undetected by either of her sons.

Scripture reference: Genesis 25:19-34.



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